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THE
CAMBRO-BRITON.

NOVEMBER, 1819.

NULLI QUIDEM MIHI SATIS ERUDITI VIDENTUR, QUIBUS
NOSTRA IGNOTA SUNT. *CICERO de Legibus.*

WELSH LANGUAGE.

—0000—

ITS ELEMENTARY CHARACTER*.

IT has already been premised, that the language, spoken by the primeval race of mankind, must have been of a more simple and more fixed character than any now known to the world. It is probable, that it consisted, at first, only of a few elementary sounds, spontaneously flowing from certain natural principles, and capable of being multiplied, by the same unerring rule, in proportion with the increasing demands for their use†. For it would be preposterous to imagine, with some theorists, that a perfect language was formed by man before there existed a ne-

* The Writer feels it his duty here to mention, that he is indebted for the suggestions, on which this Essay is founded, to the excellent author of the Welsh Dictionary, of whom it may so truly be said, with reference to his illustration of our language and literature, that "nil molitur ineptè." The new light thus thrown on the question has almost, if not entirely, removed those doubts respecting the Origin of Language, which the Writer expressed at the commencement of his former Essay. At least Mr. Pughe's theory is the most rational of any he has seen: and it may be hoped, that the world will sooner or later receive from his own pen that ample illustration of it, with reference to the Welsh tongue, which it so well deserves.

† M. De Gebelin, in his admirable Treatise on the Origin of Language and Writing, has the following appropriate remark on this subject. "Les mots de la langue primitive étoient nécessairement très bornés: ils exprimoient uniquement les sensations et les besoins journaliers, les objets les plus familiers, les actions les plus communes. Quelque extension, qu'on donne au recueil de ces mots, il sera encore si peu étendu, que les monosyllabes, en les sons et les intonations, dont est susceptible l'instrument vocal, suffiront pour le remplir." *Monde Primitif*, tom. III, p. 270.

cessity for it,—that the variety of grammatical niceties, since introduced, were invented to express merely a few simple wants,—or, in fine, that, in the grand march of the human intellect, the representatives of ideas took precedence of the ideas themselves. Such a notion, if it were not absurd on the face of it, would be discomfited at once by common experience, and by the soundest conclusions of the understanding.

Language, then, in its infancy, must have been composed merely of certain determinate natural sounds, capable, as before observed, of being multiplied upon a regular and immutable principle, and likewise capable of numerous simple combinations, concurring with the progress of society and the consequent augmentation of human ideas and exigencies. These primitive elements, upon the miraculous Confusion at Babel, to whatever perfection they had then advanced, were naturally dispersed and frittered, as it were, among the various dialects, to which that event gave birth, and have since formed the basis of all other tongues. There is no language spoken on earth, in which a certain number, however few, of these elementary sounds may not be discovered. And those languages, which retain the greatest proportion of them, must necessarily be allowed the highest claim both to purity and antiquity. In tracing these elements to the various sources, where they may now be found, our imagination may paint to us the ruins of some venerable edifice, partially appropriated to the structure of several modern buildings, of more imposing magnificence perhaps than the ancient pile, but wanting both its simplicity and its natural grandeur. And, who shall say, that it might not even be possible, by a re-union of these scattered fragments, to restore to the world no very remote semblance of the edifice, to which they originally belonged? Let us but once be satisfied about the identity of these relics, and there is nothing very extravagant in the assumption.

But our present inquiry is of a more circumscribed nature: our immediate concern with these elementary sounds being to consider them merely as they may substantiate the antiquity of the Welsh tongue. For it can be proved, that our native language holds, in this respect, a singular pre-eminence over most others, and is surpassed by none. Even the Hebrew, as it has come down to us, is inferior in this view. But, were that ancient tongue to be now spoken, as the Welsh is, in its pristine purity*,

* The Hebrew ceased to be a living language about 440 years before Christ, when the Chaldee, having nearly the same idiom and genius, but

we can hardly doubt, that it would exhibit the strongest evidence of an elementary character. For, even in the remains, that we now preserve of it, are contained many extraordinary coincidences of this sort with the Welsh language, and such, as, united with other characteristics of the Hebrew, sufficiently justify the opinion hazarded in the PRELIMINARY ESSAY, that “ it must be considered an original tongue with reference to all others, that have “ descended to our times.”

For this reason it has been thought advisable, as suggested in the preceding number, to institute a comparison between the Hebrew and Welsh tongues, as one of the strongest testimonies, that can be borne to the high antiquity of the latter. But, previously to this investigation, which must now be reserved for a future occasion, it may be proper to take a general view of such elementary articulations, as can be distinguished in the Welsh language, and which are amongst the most genuine marks of its primitive character. Many of these it shares in common with other ancient tongues, while it embraces others, that are not elsewhere to be found, and which are, therefore, a proof of its own intrinsic merit and independent resources *. Or, they prove at least, that the foundation, on which this excellence rests, can be no other than that of the original speech of the world.

To a person, acquainted only with the English language, or with such others as are reared on a similar basis, with such, in short, as are not formed from their own native energies, but unite in their composition a mixture of all other tongues, it would be scarcely possible to communicate an adequate notion of this peculiar property of the Welsh. However, the proficients in Hebrew, and more particularly those, who are also generally versed in the Oriental dialects, will at once understand what is meant by these radical sounds. Through the Hebrew, the Arabic,

differing in character, was substituted in its stead. Hence, from that period the Old Testament is found to have been written only in the last mentioned tongue.

* Humphrey Prichard, in his learned Preface to Dr. John David Rhys's celebrated Welsh Grammar, published in 1592, does justice to this quality of our language in the following passage, which evinces, at the same time, the accurate view he had taken, to a certain extent, of its elementary character.

“ Habet hæc lingua vocabula omnibus mutuatis aequipollentia, quæ nec
“ obsoleta nec oblitterata (mutuatis ademptis) ritè ut olim apud majores
“ usurpentur, quæ nostratis ingenerata, insistave naturā, aut divinitū
“ infusa, adeo sunt propria et distincta, ut a nullā aliā linguā derivata esse
“ cooptum sit, ita compta et auribus consona, ut meliora nulli agnos-
“ cant.”

the Persian, and all that class of languages, they generally prevail; and, wherever they are found, they convey the same distinct and immutable signification. “ It will be demonstratively “ evident,” says Parkhurst in the preface to his Hebrew Lexicon, “ to any one, who will attentively examine the subject, that “ the Hebrew language is ideal, or, that, from a certain, and that “ no great, number of primitive and apparently arbitrary words “ or roots, and usually expressive of some idea taken from nature, “ that is, from the external objects around us, or from our own “ constitutions by our senses or feelings, all the other words of “ that tongue are derived, or grammatically formed ; and, that, “ whatever the radicals are, the same leading idea or notion runs “ through all the deflexions of the words, however numerous “ or diversified.” This is precisely the case with the Welsh, which has for its foundation nearly all the possible variety of simple articulations, that the vocal organ is capable of expressing. From these it derives that inexhaustible power of combination, which has given it all the expressive and energetic copiousness so particularly characteristic of it, and which is capable of being improved to an endless diversity upon the same unchangeable principle. Hence too that simple dignity and symmetrical beauty, which our ancient tongue so remarkably displays in its superstructure.

The number of primitive sounds, whether purely vocal or mixed, which the human voice is capable of articulating, has been estimated at somewhat less than three hundred. Of these the Welsh language has retained nearly two hundred and twenty, about eighty of which number are of absolute and defined acceptance, about fifty more are employed in the auxiliary functions of pronouns, articles, conjunctions, and prepositions, while the remainder are regularly used as prefixes or affixes in composition, augmenting or diminishing, upon one fixed principle, the force of the words, in which they are thus incorporated*. Even the very vowels possess attributes unknown to those of other European languages. They are all pregnant with meaning, and have, either in an independent or accessory character, a determinate part to perform.

It is by a combination of these simple or primary elements, the seeds, as we may justly call them, of all human languages,

* Mr. Pughe assigns 78 to the first class above described, 51 to the second, and to the last all that remain of 213, which he estimates as the whole number of elementary sounds in our language.

that those words are formed, to which grammarians have given the name of roots. M. De Gebelin, in his excellent Treatise before quoted *, has the following judicious observations on this point:—" The union of these sounds," he says, " forms the " mass of primitive words, all of them monosyllables, all of them " embraced in the vocal organ, all of them painting physical " objects, all of them the source or roots of language, and from " which they can not be separated. In examining these primitive " words, which belong to all languages, we may always observe " them descend in one simple manner: it is these same words, " slightly varied, that have always been used to designate " accessory ideas, and different branches of the same subject." The feature, here alluded to, is strikingly characteristic of the Welsh tongue: and, had this learned writer been versed in it, he would, no doubt, have been able to furnish a complete illustration of his ingenious hypothesis. The task, he had so ably begun, would have been satisfactorily accomplished; and that full justice would have been done to our native language, which it so richly merits. By analysing even its most complex combinations, he would have been able to discover those radical words, from which they were formed: while a dissection of these latter would have exposed to his observation those secret springs, which he so justly regards as the vital principles of all human speech †. By such a process as this the antiquity and purity of the Welsh tongue may be demonstrated. For "analysis," to borrow the words of the same author ‡, " rests upon two immovable bases, upon the vocal organ, the same now as it " was at the earliest period of time, and upon the mass of " words, employed, in all tongues, to express ideas common to " all men."

The next Essay on this subject is designed to illustrate, by the analysis here contemplated, the general remarks above offered. By thus ascending, as it were, to the very egg,—however con-

* *Monde Primitif*, tom. iii. p. 8.

† M. De Gebelin elucidates the principle of elementary articulation, as applied to language, by the following apposite comparisons:—" L'homme trouve dans la nature les éléments de tout ce dont il s'occupe: " la musique est fondée sur son octave, qui ne dependoit jamais de " l'oreille: la peinture sur des couleurs primitives, que l'art ne peut créer: " la géométrie sur les raports et les proportions immuables des corps: la " médecine sur les propriétés physiques,"—*Ibid.*, tom. iii. p. 72.

‡ *Ibid.* tom. iii. p. 271.

trary in some cases to the Horatian rule,—we may be able to unveil those *arcana*, which have not hitherto been publicly investigated by any writer on our language *. Not only will the excellence, for which it is here contended, be effectually proved by this inquiry; but it will also appear, that the essences of all ancient tongues are primarily the same, that their diversities are merely accidental, and are reducible to those elements, which nothing can alter, because they have nature itself for their fountain.

THE TRIADS.—No. III.

— --- — TRIADS OF THE ISLE OF BRITAIN †.

xii. The three Combined Expeditions, that went from the Isle of Britain.

The first was that, which went with Ur, son of Erin, the Armipotent, of Scandinavia. He came into this island in the time of Cadial, son of Erin, to solicit assistance under the stipulation that he should obtain from every principal town ‡ no more than the number he should be able to bring into it. And there came only to the first town, besides himself, Mathutta Vawr, his servant. Thus he procured two from that, and four from the second town, and from the third town the number became eight, and from the next sixteen, and thus in like proportion from every other town; so that for the last town the number could not be procured throughout the island. And with him departed three score and one thousand; and with more than that number of able men he could not be supplied in the whole island, as there remained behind only children and old people. Thus Ur, son of Erin, the Armipotent was the most complete levyer of a host that ever lived; and it was through inadvertence that the

* Mr. Pughe's Dictionary, which is arranged on this principle, should be noticed as being, in some degree, an exception to this observation, as well as some excellent remarks of his in the 1st volume of the Cambrian Register. A systematic dissertation, however, is still a *desideratum*, and one, perhaps, which he alone can satisfactorily supply.

† Arch. of Wales, vol. ii. p. 59—60. Tr. 14 and 15.

‡ The word in the original is *Prifgaer*, which means a fortress, or fortified town of the first order, not perhaps exactly correspondent with our modern idea of town, although that word is used in the translation.